

10 March 1971

**MEMORANDUM****SUBJECT: Political Implications of US Overflights of Chinese Territory**

1. Peking has consistently shown concern, anxiety and anger over US or US-sponsored intelligence overflights of its territory. Such flights have repeatedly been the subject of complaints at the intermittent Sino-US talks in Warsaw and have been the occasion of vituperative abuse of the US in public statements. There is every indication that this Chinese concern and anger is real and deep-seated; in Chinese eyes such flights are a graphic indication both that the US continues to treat Peking's sovereignty over Chinese territory cavalierly and that US "hostile intentions" toward China have not abated. This anger and concern would be felt by the Chinese irrespective of the number of overflights involved and whether or not these flights were shallow incursions or deep penetrations of Chinese territory, but multiple flights and deep penetrations would undoubtedly compound both concern and anger.

2. The indications are strong that China believes that it can "live with" present South Vietnamese operations in southern Laos -- so long as these operations retain their current scope. There is little question, however, that Peking would view the Indochina situation in a radically different light if it thought that the current Laotian operations were expanding northward or that an attack on North Vietnam itself were imminent. In this respect China has not only to take counsel of its own fears but also those of its North Vietnamese allies -- and there are indications that concern in Hanoi is perhaps more acute than in Peking. In these circumstances the Chinese are likely to weigh all indications of US and South Vietnamese intentions particularly carefully -- and they might well consider intelligence overflights of Chinese territory an indication that further US or South Vietnamese operations are contemplated. In the light of possible contingencies Peking has been building a case regarding US actions

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with respect to China which could be triggered by further moves in the war. As part of this case, the Chinese have in recent months repeatedly drawn attention to US military flights and patrolling in the vicinity of territory it claims as its own; it has issued more "serious warnings" in the past few months than in the previous year and a half.

3. Despite its concern about potential moves in Indochina, Peking has clearly taken aboard US gestures aimed at the relaxation of Sino-US tensions, and although it has not publicly acknowledged these gestures, it has nevertheless effectively conveyed to Washington its interest in the evolution of US policy vis-a-vis China. There continues to be a number of reasons for Chinese interest in a substantive dialogue with Washington, but there are also good, historical reasons why the Chinese, from their point of view, would remain skeptical of ultimate US intentions toward China. It is very likely that Chinese attitudes toward the US are in the balance at the moment. In these circumstances Peking is likely to be particularly sensitive to any indication of the "real" US position on "respect for Chinese sovereignty." In other words, the Chinese wish to ascertain if we mean what we say.

4. Peking has undoubtedly assumed that recent restrictions on US intelligence overflights of Chinese territory is a sign that Washington has taken into consideration its long-standing protests on this issue. It would, therefore, believe that any resumption of such flights was an excellent indication that "bettering" of Sino-US relations had a very low priority in Washington.

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